Current Trends in Changing Official American Toponyms

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Geographic features, such as streams and summits, have official names that are recorded by the United States government, and citizens can submit proposals to officially change one of these names. Name change proposals to the government from 2017 and 2018 were analyzed to understand different factors that contribute to modern naming practices. Various elements from each proposal were categorized and recorded so that numerical analysis could show why proposals are submitted, what features are in most proposals, what kinds of names are suggested, and what naming choices imply about American people in general. Each proposal also includes the latitude and longitude coordinates of its specific geographic feature. This detail allowed all the features from the name change proposals to be mapped in ArcGIS Online, and spatial analysis was done on the different categories recorded for each feature. The results of these different studies are discussed, along with what their implications might be and what areas could be further studied in the future.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Mai Kuha for being my advisor on this project. Her help and knowledge of the field was greatly beneficial for guiding my research and leading me to investigate new areas of study.

I would also like to thank my family for their never-ending support throughout my college career.

Process Analysis Statements

For my thesis project, I wanted to use my mapping and spatial analysis skills from my geography major to examine linguistic trends or other data related to my linguistics minor. I worked with my advisor Dr. Mai Kuha, a linguistics professor, to find possible topics or areas within linguistics to focus my spatial analysis on. One field we looked into was the study of names, called onomastics, and I found a related article that analyzed official geographic feature and place names in the United States and how they are being changed today to remove derogatory terms and honor Native Americans. This article collected its data from the United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN), the organization that records all official geographic names in the United States and who a person contacts if they want to have a specific official name changed. The BGN website includes a page where all name proposals that have been submitted since 2001 are available. There are thousands of proposals combined into PDFs that can be downloaded by the public, and each proposal lists the geographic feature's location, previously known names, current name, newly proposed name, motivation to request a name change, and inspiration for the new proposed name. The previously mentioned research article on derogatory names had accessed all published name proposals from 2006 to 2016 and selected each proposal that referenced names related to Native Americans and copied its information into a new dataset that could be analyzed. I was fascinated by this relatively unexplored dataset of official name change proposals and the possibilities for future study that it held. I decided to replicate and continue the research about Native American related names in the United States but also explore other aspects of changing geographic names in America.

Once I had decided on my topic for research, Dr. Kuha and I established a general

timeline for the project to make sure that I was staying on track to finish each step of the project. In order to compare more recent data on geographic names that reference Native Americans, I decided to download all the name proposals from 2017 and 2018 so that I could compare the percentages I would calculate to the 2006 through 2016 percentages found by the previous researcher. However, I also wanted to study other overall trends in the last two years of proposals such as why people submitted name change proposals, what were common ways to think of new geographic feature names, how did names reflect gender inequality and race inequality, and more. In addition to these questions, I also wanted to use the coordinates of each geographic feature from the proposals and map them on the website ArcGIS Online. I have previously completed multiple projects in my geography courses that looked for general spatial trends in data, and I wanted to use a similar process to further understand the questions I had for my new name data. For this mapping process, I decided to use ArcGIS Online because I had never used or explored the website for a project, and I wanted to learn more about its capabilities and familiarize myself with it. I have also had geography professors point out that much of the data we work with in their classes are preprocessed and delivered to us in a mappable format, and so I wanted to work with more raw data and convert it into something that would be useful to map.

Once I had decided on what questions I was going to try and answer through my research and how I was going to investigate them, the next step was to gather my data. I had downloaded some proposals from the BGN website when I was planning my thesis project in the previous fall semester, but when I went to download the rest of the more recent proposals, the website was down because of the United States government shut down in January of 2019. I worked with the data I did have and planned ahead until the site was back up and I could download more PDFs of

name change proposals. These PDFs are called quarterly review lists, and all the proposals that are submitted during a quarter are listed together in one file. Although this made downloading and reading the proposals quite easy, the proposal data was not formatted in a way that makes spatial or quantitative analysis immediately possible. In order to measure trends in the proposals, the information from each proposal needed to be categorized and entered into a data table. Converting each proposal into usable records in an Excel sheet took longer than I originally expected since the proposals were in paragraph format making it necessary to read each of the 364 submissions individually and find all of the relevant details I wanted to record. I considered writing a computer program that would read through a file and break it into sections that could be copied into an organized table like a spreadsheet, but since the proposal entries were all different lengths and somewhat different formats, it did not seem feasible to use coding to speed up the process. I originally created ten columns in my Excel sheet to record ten separate details from each proposal, but by the end of my data entry I had fifteen columns because I kept discovering aspects that I could map from each proposal that could be analyzed for spatial trends.

The next step of my project after I had copied the proposal data into my Excel spreadsheet was to do initial spatial analyses by mapping all 364 feature locations and examining the layout of the different aspects of each feature. Creating a map from my Excel sheet was a quick process because I had the latitude and longitude of each location recorded in the table. It turned out that for many of the maps I created based on the name proposal details, there were no obvious spatial trends. I knew this was a possibility going into the project, but I found it unfortunate that this would likely result in fewer maps being included in my final paper and a lack of spatial trends to discuss. At this point, I also went over the different data categories I had used in the Excel sheet with Dr. Kuha, and she pointed out to me that the classifications I had

replicated from the BGN website did not seem to be mutually exclusive or very useful for my eventual analysis. This made sense, so I had to decide on new category systems for different columns of the data records, which was an unexpected obstacle.

The following step in the project was to look for secondary sources about the study of geographic feature names and see what other research I could gather to help explain my own data. The articles available on this topic primarily focused on names and power and names and identity. Since I was looking at various aspects of names and how they relate to the people who think of them, I thought that looking further into research on names and identity could be useful. I collected sources on this topic and then started drafting my thesis paper. I had gone into this project with many different questions, so once I started writing the paper, I tried to answer each one. However, it was difficult to structure the paper at first in a way that presented a central message about the many things I examined and researched. This made writing the first draft of my paper especially challenging. Once I had written a full draft, I worked with Dr. Kuha to edit it and restructure it in a way that made better sense.

Going into this project, I was primarily hoping to discover new and interesting spatial trends about naming practices in the United States. My end result contained much less spatial analysis than I had anticipated, but it still provided fascinating ideas about possible current naming trends and what people value and memorialize today. I learned that it was more difficult than I would have expected to change the goals of my project and even to change how I classified the data in order to make it more understandable to my audience. Once I had begun thinking about a part of my project a certain way, it was challenging to try and picture it in a different way and from a new reader's point of view. Dr. Kuha was especially helpful with this since she was able to point out new directions for research and how to approach a problem from

a new angle. I had not worked closely with a professor while doing research before, and it was surprising how beneficial and helpful it was to be able to work directly with an advisor.

I believe that my research is useful because it focuses on a unique dataset since not many large records of current names also list the detailed meaning behind each name like official name change proposals are required to do. Since each person who proposes a name change to the BGN has to explicitly say where the new name originates from, the inspirations and values linked to creating place names are studied in my paper, along with the most common reasons people today try to change official place names. The BGN dataset of name proposals is a fascinating source to work with, and many other studies could be conducted on it in the future.

Thesis: Current Trends in Changing Official American Toponyms

INTRODUCTION

Various insights about a society and its culture can be gained by examining how geographic features are named and why people attempt to change accepted names. Toponymy is the study of "geographic place names, including natural places like mountains and rivers, and human places, like cities and countries" (Montello, n.d.). A toponym is a specific place name, and the word comes from the Greek words *topos* for 'place' and *onoma* for 'name' (Montello, n.d.). Different cultures use different methods to name geographic features, and changing a place name can have large implications. Studying a country's toponyms can reveal the culture of its people, such as their origins, values, beliefs, and practices. Specifically, studying American toponyms that are produced today can show what modern United States citizens value and wish to memorialize. Since there is so much meaning and history behind many toponyms, trying to officially change a historical name to a new name can be a contested and difficult task (Helleland, 2012). For this reason, examining which official toponyms people are trying to change today can demonstrate how the values of interested citizens have changed from the past. Since these insights about current American values can be gained from American toponymy, new place name proposals from recent years were studied to determine what motivates people to name places near them, what inspires the creation of specific place names, why place names are changed, and what aspects of identity people value and honor as demonstrated by their choice in a place name.

THE U.S. BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) was established after the American Civil War in 1890 so that names could be standardized as more western territories were explored and settled ("BGN - Home", n.d.). Consistent and standardized geographic feature names were needed for the work of surveyors, map makers, and scientists ("BGN - Home", n.d.). Naming something expresses ownership and shows that one person or group has the sole right to decide how everyone else should refer to the specific object (Montello, n.d.). For this and other reasons, colonizers would often change toponyms in the new places they explored and conquered. Today, there are even more reasons to make sure toponyms in a country are standardized (Montello, n.d.). Automated mapping and digital place-name indexes rely on consistency in geographic names along with fields such as "navigation, military activity, scientific study, economic development, tourism, postal services, government, education, and more" (Montello, n.d.). Additionally, standardized place names are vital to everyday conversations so that people can know they are referring to the same location (Helleland, 2012).

Proposals for official name changes are submitted to the BGN for multiple different reasons. Since the BGN keeps track of all government recognized names, sometimes people have to submit a proposal to correct the spelling of a feature name on government maps. Sometimes a geographic feature has a name used by members of the local community, but the government is not aware of this name yet. Occasionally, an official name needs to be changed to better represent a changed landscape. Sometimes a geographic feature has an official name that contains offensive or derogatory words, and members of a community will submit a proposal to have the name changed to something more appropriate. In other cases, a geographic feature has no known name at all, and a person will submit a proposal for a new name so that it can then be labeled on maps. These various reasons are all examples of why a person or an organization

might submit a name change proposal, which will only be formally accepted by the BGN if the listed reason and evidence for a change is persuasive enough ("BGN - Home", n.d.).

Official place name changes produce strong reactions and are fairly difficult to accomplish (Helleland, 2012) ("BGN - Home", n.d.). Helleland (2012) presents some of the reasons why people can become upset or even angry when it is suggested that a name they are familiar with should be changed to something else. Specifically, this can occur because memories are attached to places and their proper names, and changing the name of a place has effects on people's thoughts and memories of it. Similarly, even when the official name of an unnamed place is being decided for the first time, there can be long discussions and forceful opinions (Helleland, 2012). For these reasons, when a new name is decided on for an official proposal, it can be assumed that a lot of planning and thought went into the proposed name.

PROCEDURES

The data for this research were compiled from the BGN website. The BGN collects proposals related to changing toponyms in the United States, and in order to be considered, a proposal needs to demonstrate proof that a name change is necessary or strongly desired ("BGN - Home", n.d.). This means that all proposals include specific information, history, and evidence about the proposed name and why it was chosen or why an existing name should be replaced. The BGN publishes quarterly lists of all submitted topographic name proposals, and any proposal that was received from 2001 onward can be accessed by the public ("Active Quarterly Review Lists", 2019). For this project, the quarterly lists of proposals from the years 2017 and 2018 were downloaded and examined. This resulted in 364 proposed names that were added to an Excel spreadsheet along with multiple characteristics about each name proposal. For each

proposal, the newly proposed name was recorded along with any previous names, the state that the geographic feature is located in, what type of feature it is, its latitude and longitude, why the proposal was submitted, whether the name was from a language besides English, why the specific name was chosen, and what the words in the name actually refer to.

To better understand the collected dataset of 364 name proposals, the reasons for each proposal being submitted were grouped into three categories that distinguished whether a name was recently thought of and whether the feature was previously named. These categories were created for the sake of this project and did not directly match the information from the BGN website. Each proposal has a brief description of its purpose written by the BGN, and these descriptions were further grouped into the aforementioned three categories. The three categories are "Name something with no name", "Replace existing name with brand new name", and "Change official records to name in local usage". This new classification system better allowed an analysis of general trends.

Since each proposal must explain the origin of the proposed name as evidence for its suitability, the various aspects of these name origins can also be categorized. When reading the proposals, four main categories can be found for the name origins. First, many names are chosen to commemorate a person, a group of people, or an object. Second, multiple names are chosen by using the same name as a nearby town, hill, school, or almost anything else. Third, an aspect about the geographic feature's location or its description will be used, such as prevalent colors, shapes, plants, animals, stories, and more. Fourth is any suggested names that are given without explicit explanations as to their origin, usually due to the name being historic and the origins being unknown. These categories were created for this project to help study overall trends in naming inspiration, and each name proposal was individually studied to determine which

category it best fit into.

In order to examine the data for spatial trends, the latitude and longitude of each proposed name and its feature were added to an Excel spreadsheet along with columns for the categories mentioned above. Creating maps with points for all the geographic features can be quickly accomplished on the website ArcGIS Online (Esri, 2018). Any spreadsheet can be imported into a new map if there are latitude and longitude coordinates, and then the feature points can be styled and colored to show different aspects of the data. Another useful feature of the website is the ability to make heat maps or density maps of feature points that show where points are most concentrated. These mapping functions were used to examine the name proposals data and screenshots of the maps were saved for visuals.

RESULTS

All of the name change proposals that were submitted to the BGN from 2017 and 2018 added up to a total of 364 proposals that were widely spread across the United States (see Figure 1). The higher concentrations of proposals were in the north east and along the west coast, both areas that are densely populated resulting in more people who might choose to submit a proposal (see Figure 2). The states where the most proposals were submitted were Oregon, New York, Pennsylvania, California, North Carolina, Alaska, and Washington. The most common geographic feature types that have submissions are streams, summits, reservoirs, falls, lakes, and valleys. Around 12% of the proposed new names use non-English words, with the most common languages being German, Russian, and Aleut. Out of all the proposals, 86% were submitted by citizens and 14% were submitted by governmental organizations. Additionally, 15% of all the proposals were for features located on administrative land such as state or national

parks, nature conservancies, and other protected areas.

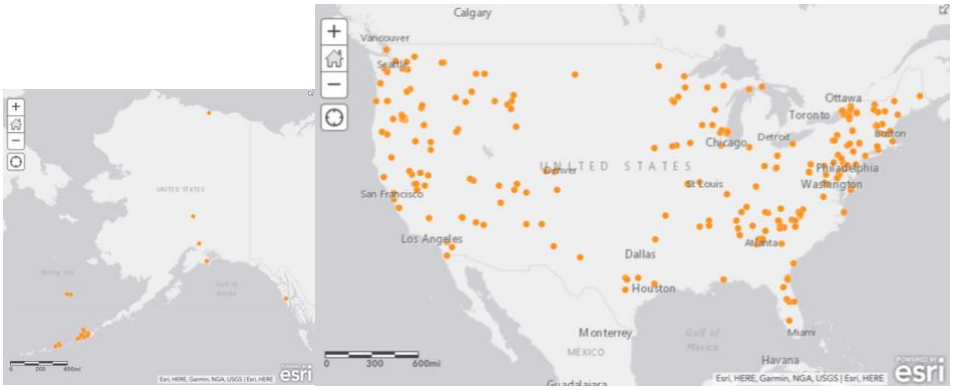


Figure 1: Distribution of all geographic features from the 2017-2018 name change proposals

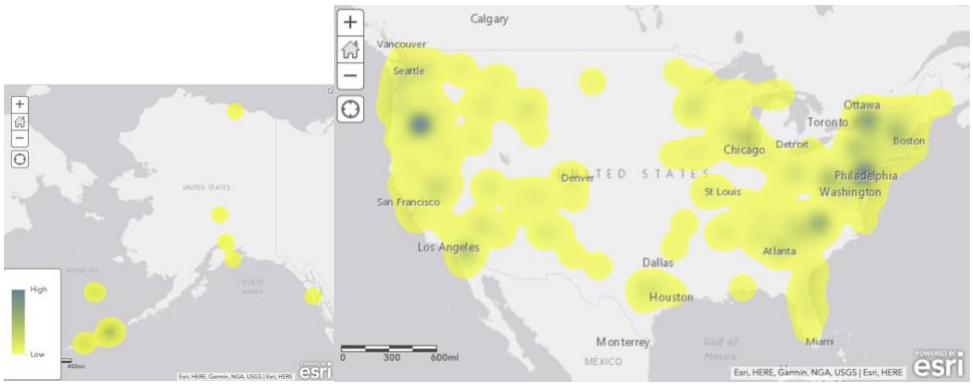


Figure 2: Distribution density of all 2017-2018 name change proposals

Of the 364 proposals, 52% were submitted in order to “Name something with no name”, 37% were submitted in order to “Change official records to name in local usage”, and 11% were submitted in order to “Replace existing name with brand new name”. This shows that over half of the proposals were written in order to give an unnamed geographic feature an official name, and combining the 52% of newly named features and 11% of features with a different new name results in 63% of proposals providing a new possible toponym that had been thought of by community members within recent years. The necessity of standardized toponyms and the desire

to connect the local landscape to one's history and culture could then to be some of the main driving factors behind recent official name proposals to the BGN. The spatial layout of feature points for each of these three categories shows no prominent trends and names related to each of the categories are found throughout most of the states.

From the dataset of all 364 names, 37% of the names were chosen for commemoration, 30% of the names were chosen based on an aspect of the location, 26% of the names were chosen by using a nearby existing name, and 7% of the names had unknown or unlisted origins. The commemoration category can be separated into two subgroups so that 36% of all names commemorate humans while 1% of all names commemorate an object. This shows that honoring a specific person or group of people is one of the most common ways of picking a geographic name in America. When a name is chosen to commemorate a person or people, the decision shows what types of people are valued in a community and who is considered worthy of recognition in the United States. The practice of using the same name as a nearby feature for a newly proposed name shows how prevalent local place names are in a community's identity since reusing a name creates a reference to a location many people already know. There could also be a reluctance to come up with a completely new name since this can sometimes be a difficult task. The practice of naming a geographic feature after an aspect of its makeup helps connect people's physical view of a place to the mental picture of a place conjured with its name. The spatial layout of feature points for each of these four categories shows no prominent trends and names related to each of the categories are found throughout most of the states.

It is also possible to compare the rates that newly created names and previously in use names are based on certain things. The 364 proposals can be divided into 228 proposals for completely new names and 136 proposals for officially recognizing local names that have been

in use for some time. For the new name related proposals, it is about just as common to see a name proposal based on commemoration (39%) as one based on an aspect of a place (37%). Conversely, for the name proposals that deal with names already in local use, it is about just as common to see a name proposal based on commemoration (32%) as one based on duplicating a nearby similar name (34%). This would seem to show that more people today are wanting descriptive new names as opposed to reusing nearby place names. The locations of new proposed names and locally used proposed names are evenly distributed across the country and there are no noticeable trends when the inspirations for the names are mapped either.

There are many different people and things that are commemorated in the names proposed to the BGN. Out of the proposed commemorative names, 50% commemorate individuals who are males, 21% commemorate families, 18% commemorate individuals who are females, 8% commemorate people groups, and 3% commemorate non-human entities like pets. Since males are often the most remembered and honored in history, it matches general expectations that half of the commemorative names honor men. According to the proposals, some geographic features are named after a local family who has lived in an area for generations or has contributed to the local lifestyle, which is why the second highest group commemorates family names. Around a fifth of commemorative names honor women, and about a tenth of commemorative names honor groups of people such as different Native American tribes. These two categories correspond to people who are less likely to be honored or recognized in history and who are currently still fighting for equal representation, so this pattern of commemorative naming practices makes sense for the time period. While names honoring females, males, and specific groups of people were fairly well distributed across the country, names honoring an entire family occurred primarily in the northern half of the country (see Figure 3).

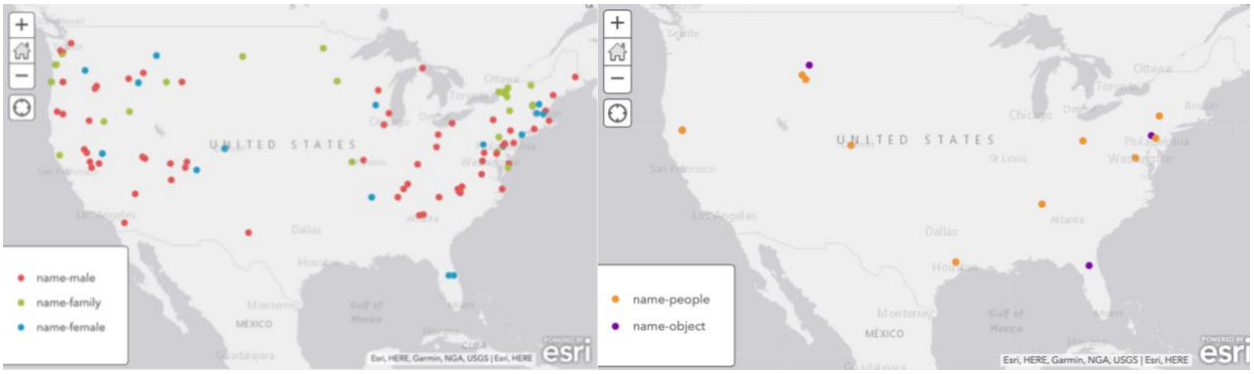


Figure 3: Distribution of commemorative names based on gender, family, and uncommonness

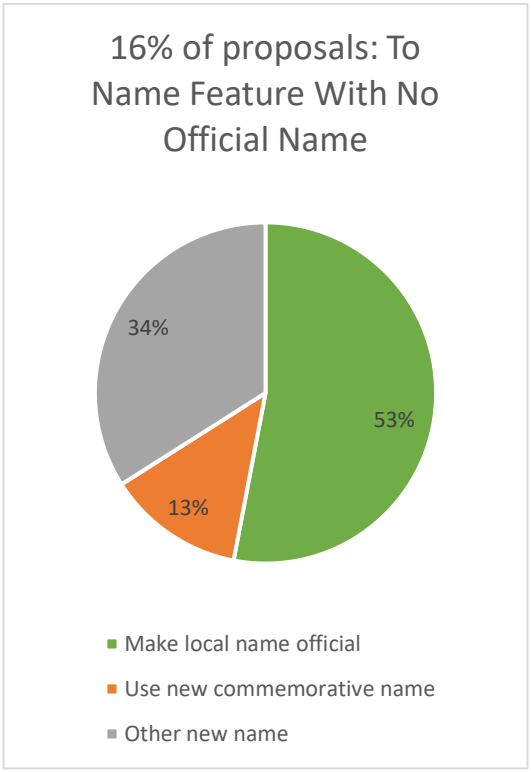
Much research has been done on the history of place names containing racial slurs and the effects these names have in the current day. Some common derogatory terms used in place names in the United States are 'negro', 'squaw' (sq**w), 'halfbreed', 'digger', and others. Within the dataset of 364 name proposals, 32 (9%) of the proposals were requests to change an offensive name to a new name. The majority of the offensive names contained slurs against African Americans and Native Americans. The terms that were identified by the proposals as offensive to African Americans were 'negro', 'n----r', 'runaway slave', 'Jim Crow', 'Confederate', 'Jefferson Davis', and John C. 'Calhoun'. The specific proposals explain that Jefferson Davis and John C. Calhoun were both men strongly associated with the Confederacy and proponents for slavery, which is why some locations that feature their names are trying to be changed. The terms that were identified by the proposals as offensive to Native Americans were 'sq**w', 'halfbreed', 'digger', John 'Evans', Gustavus Cheyney 'Doane', and Ferdinand Vandeveer 'Hayden'. 'Sq**w' has been considered the equivalent of 'n----r' but towards Native Americans (Nick, 2017). Specific proposals explain that 'halfbreed' is a derogatory term for people of Native American and white ancestry, 'digger' is an offensive term for the Wintu people who often used digging tools, John Evans was directly involved in the Sand Creek

Massacre where a village of Cheyenne and Arapaho people were attacked, Lieutenant Gustavus Cheyney Doane led the massacre of Chief Heavy Runner's Piegan Blackfeet village, and Ferdinand Vandeveer Hayden "advocated the extermination of tribal people in official government documents" ("Active Quarterly Review Lists", 2019). The new proposed names created to replace the previous offensive place names towards African Americans are often commemorative names that celebrate local heroes or historical surnames in an area (47% of the time). The new proposed names created to replace offensive place names towards Native Americans are almost all names of Native American tribes or historical Native American toponyms in their respective indigenous language (87% of the time).

Previous research has been done with the BGN name proposal information by I. M. Nick (2017), and she looked at how Native Americans are represented in toponyms in America. The dataset Nick (2017) compiled was collected from the BGN name proposals that were released from February 6, 2006 to December 30, 2016, which resulted in 2170 name change proposals. From this set of proposals, Nick (2017) took the 271 cases that related to indigenous names and created the corpus that she studied. Her findings were that the top five states that had name change proposals submitted from them were Oregon, Montana, Alaska, California, and Arizona. These specific states were noted to have passed legislation to remove offensive geographic place names. Out of the 19 different geographic feature types that were present in the corpus, the two most prevalent types were streams and summits. About 16% of the proposals in the corpus were to name a geographical feature without an official name. Out of this subset, 53% of the proposals were to make a locally used name be considered official, and 13% of the proposals were for new names that commemorated events or people (see Figure 4a). A second main grouping of the corpus was the 84% of proposals to change the official, registered name of a

geographic feature. Of this subset, 79% of the proposals were related to changing names that contained the word sq**w, which is understandably high since this term is very offensive (see Figure 4b).

(a)



(b)

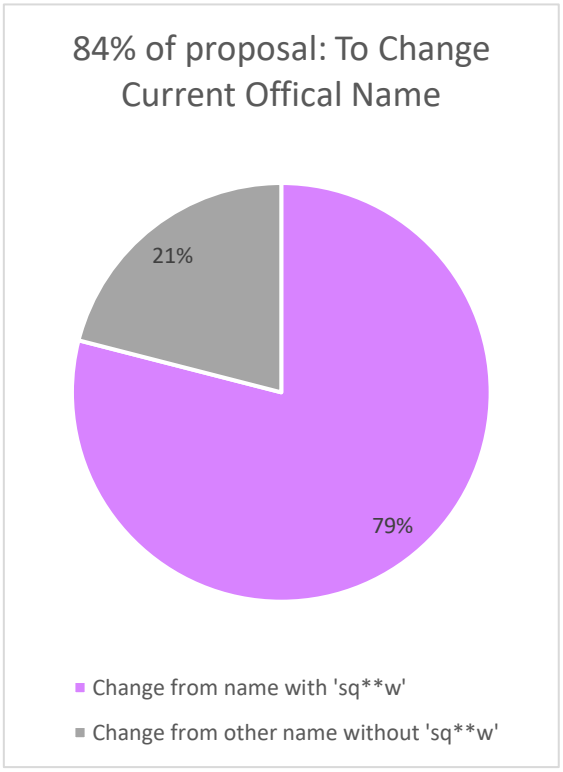


Figure 4: Chart breakdowns of reasons for submitting proposals found by Nick (2017)

From the 364 recent name change proposals in the dataset used for this project, 32 of them involve indigenous names or terms. Within these 32 proposals, the top states that contributed were Alaska, California, Pennsylvania/Washington, and Colorado/Wyoming. Two of these states are the same as those found in the Nick (2017) research, so Alaska and California have continued their trend of renaming geographic features in honor of indigenous people. Out of the 10 different geographic feature types that were present in this set of indigenous name changes, the two most common types were streams and summits, which is the same as Nick

(2017) found. About 28% of the proposals in the dataset were submitted to name a geographical feature without an official name, which is a higher percentage than in the Nick (2017) corpus (28% versus 16%). Out of this subset, 11% of the proposals were to make a locally used name be considered official, and 44% of the proposals were for new names that commemorated events or people (see Figure 5a). Compared to the 271-name corpus, the percentage of names that were found only in local usage was about a fifth of the size of the percentage found in the Nick (2017) data (11% versus 53%), and the percentage of new names that commemorated individuals or people was much larger than the percentage from the corpus (44% versus 13%). A second main grouping of indigenous name proposals was the 72% of proposals submitted in order to change the official, registered name of a geographic feature. This is a lower percentage than was found in the Nick (2017) corpus (72% versus 84%). Of this subset, 26% of the proposals were related to changing names that contained the word 'sq**w'. This is about a third of the size of the percentage found by Nick (2017) (26% versus 79%), and this difference could either indicate that fewer toponyms were found that contain the term 'sq**w' or that a smaller percentage of people decided to take action against toponyms that contain the term 'sq**w' in recent years. In addition to the 26% of proposals for changes to names with 'sq**w', there was also 13% of the proposals that involved changing geographic feature names that used a different slur for Native Americans, such as 'digger' or 'halfbreed', 26% of the proposals to change names that referenced racist historical figures such as Jefferson Davis or John Calhoun, and 35% that proposed changing the current name to match records or recognize local tribes and were previously offensive (see Figure 5b). The decision to change names that honor racist figures from history and replace the names with native words from local tribes shows some citizens' interest in making landscapes more inclusive and respectful of diversity.

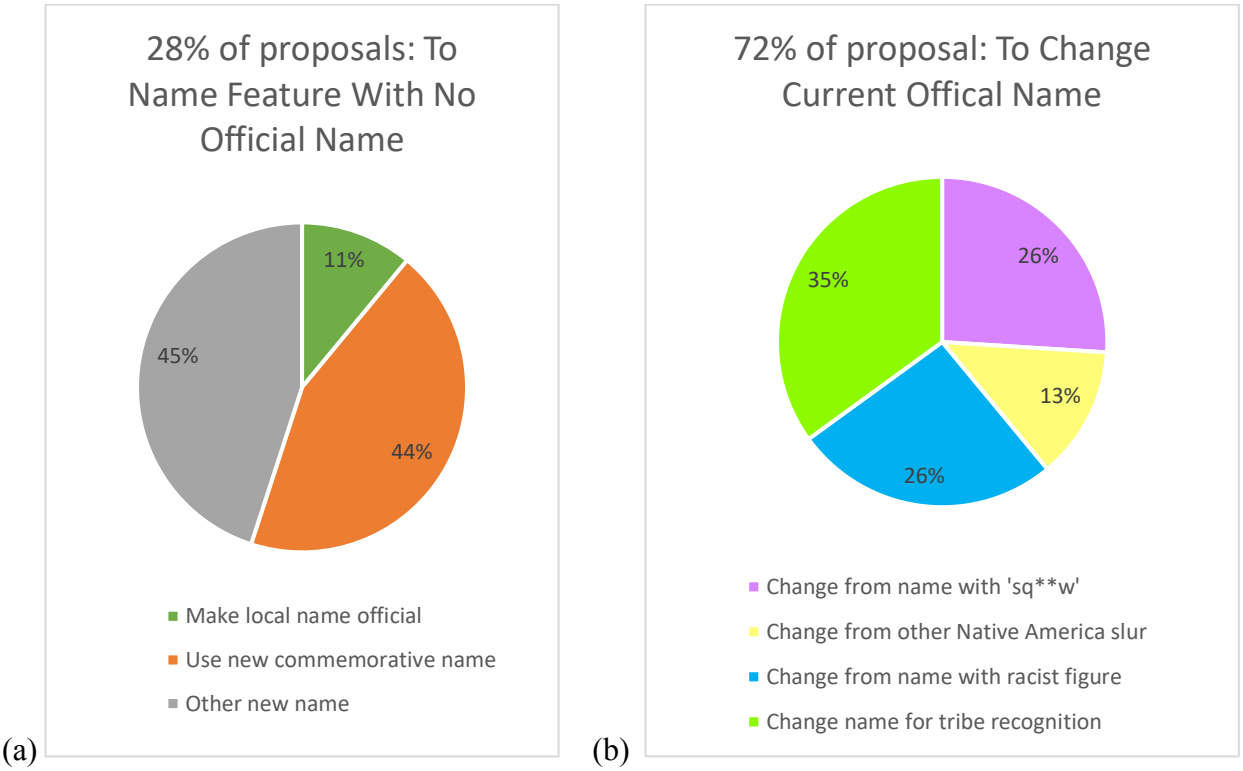


Figure 5: Chart breakdowns of reasons for submitting proposals that concern indigenous names found for this project

While some offensive place names are in the process of being changed, there are still hundreds of other place names in the United States that are offensive or derogatory. A file of all official place names in the United States is available to the public on the BGN website, and it was downloaded and place names that contained certain offensive terms were selected for a new spreadsheet of existing offensive place names ("BGN - Home", n.d.). This spreadsheet was created to focus on names that are widely considered to be derogatory towards African Americans and Native Americans. The terms that were searched for in the official place names file were 'negro', 'darkey', 'Jim Crow', 'Uncle Tom', 'injun', 'sq**w', 'digger', and 'halfbreed'. While there are other offensive terms and racist figures used in official place names, these

selected terms were the only ones searched for because they tend to not have alternative meanings unlike last names. There were 546 official geographic feature names that contained derogatory terms toward African Americans and 812 official geographic feature names that contained derogatory terms toward Native Americans. In the initial dataset of 364 name change proposals, there were 18 proposals to change a name that was offensive to African American history and 20 proposals to change a name that was offensive to Native American history, with 3 names in both categories that honored historical figures who were racist and harmful to multiple minority groups. From these proposals, geographic feature names that dishonored African Americans were primarily noticed in the south and along the west coast, and geographic feature names that dishonored Native Americans were primarily found in the central north and the west of the country (see Figure 6). When the 546 official feature names that currently dishonor African Americans were mapped, there were high concentrations of offensive names in the Appalachia region, the southern border, and California (see Figure 7). There were fewest official names that dishonor African Americans in the central United States, especially in the north. When the 812 official feature names that currently dishonor Native Americans were mapped, there were high concentrations of offensive names in Wisconsin, along the country's southern border, and in California (see Figure 8). There were fewest official names that dishonor Native Americans in the central United States and in the south.

Figure 6: Places that want to change offensive names and who the current names dishonor

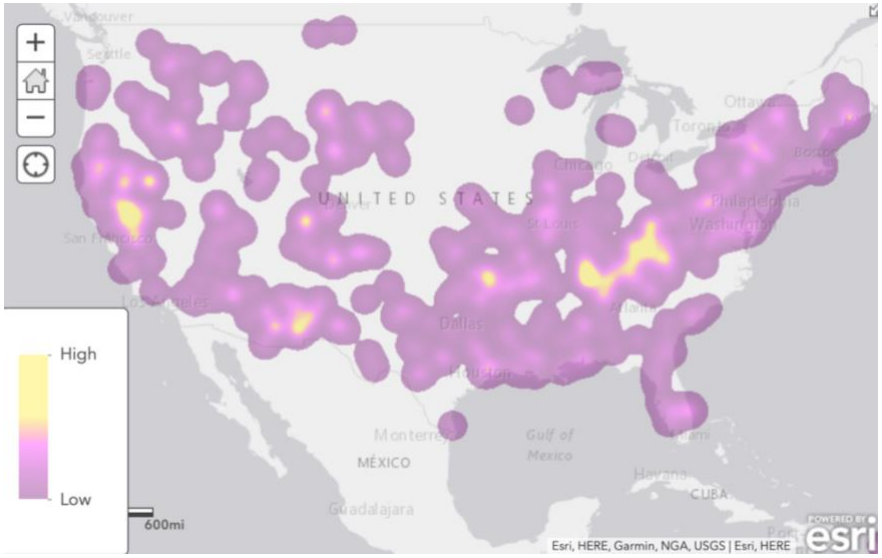


Figure 7: Density map of all official feature names that contain certain derogatory terms towards African Americans

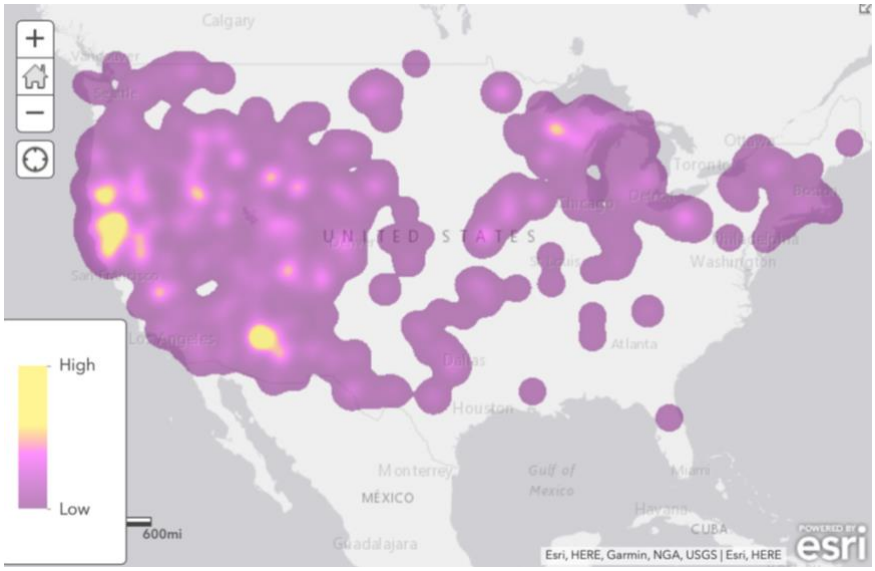


Figure 8: Density map of all official feature names that contain certain derogatory terms towards Native Americans

Place names are strongly connected to identity since a person's or group's identity can be shared through naming geographic features, and being familiar with local place names is an important part of belonging to a group (Helleland, 2012). Helleland (2012) describes the many aspects of the relationship between people and place names and how identity factors into it. Firstly, it has been said that the more common agreements there are over how things are named and referred to, the stronger the bonds are within a group. This is demonstrated in how it is important for an individual to be aware of local place names to participate in a community and communicate with others. Christopher Tilley said that "a topo-analysis is one exploring the creation of self-identity through place" (Helleland, 2012). An example of this is how since a person's personal experiences and culture are connected to place names and to their identity, exploring place names is also related to exploring one's own identity. Especially if a person has a role in choosing the official place name of a geographic feature, they will likely reference their

own identity, values, and culture when deciding on the final name. Since names are so important to people and their culture, having offensive place names in a country negatively impacts people and perpetuates racial divides. Reclaiming certain toponyms for original indigenous communities has been one strategy for lessening the effects of colonization and its history and instead honoring and giving value back to the historic indigenous claims (Rose-Redwood, 2016). This strategy challenges white supremacist logic that is found throughout the country's landscape by placing indigenous naming practices over colonial settlers' (Rose-Redwood, 2016). Place names reinforce the overall identity of a country and changing those names or adding new names can help current citizens place their own identity and values within their landscape.

CONCLUSION

Just as examining historic toponyms can reveal new facts about the past, examining recent toponymic changes can reveal values and opinions held in the present. The United States Board on Geographic Names accepts official requests to change toponyms or introduce new toponyms, and these data are available to the public to analyze. Trends in 2017 and 2018 name proposals show that people today primarily submit proposals to name geographic features with no name, an action that increases clarity when discussing the local landscape and also provides citizens with a way to leave a permanent mark on the world. These recent proposals most commonly find inspiration for names in fellow humans whether they are important historical figures or dedicated local community members. Further analysis could be done to examine what kinds of occupations the commemorated individuals held, which would show that in addition to most commemorated individuals being male, there are possibly some jobs that are more valued and found worthy of honor. The most common reason to have an existing toponym changed is to

correct an inconsistency in government records and have the government formally use a locally used toponym. This practice of correcting records helps clear up confusion and allows people to be sure they are referring to the same place when they are talking to each other or referencing an official map. The proposals also demonstrate that people are currently taking action to reduce the number of offensive place names found in the United States, and there are a variety of new names created as replacements that honor underrepresented histories. Further research could be done to investigate why specific areas in the country have the highest numbers of offensive place names and also what the yearly rate is for offensive place names being changed. While this paper did not focus on specific proposals and the various histories found in certain toponyms, individual submitted proposals could be investigated to answer new questions about naming practices by a specific group of people or in a specific region of the country. Examples of the close relationship toponyms have with identity were examined along with how identity motivates the change or creation of names and impacts how cultures are seen or view themselves in their landscape. This initial analysis will hopefully be the starting point or inspiration for other analyses into current geographic naming practices in America.

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